Those Who Loved Him Pay Tribute to Herbert Beerbohm Tree

A Composite Biography

The Actor's Widow, His Daughters and Friends Contribute

HERBERT BEERBOHM TREE: SOME MEMORIES OF HIM AND OF HIS ART. Collected by Max Beerbohm. Published by E. P. Dutton & Co.

THE death of Sir Herbert Beerbohm Tree on July 2, 1917, removed the most conspicuous figure of his time from the English stage. It was imperative that some record of the actor-manager, his long years of service to the English theater and some lasting portrait of his unique personality be preserved for posterity.

It would have been equally unfortunate to have enclosed this personality within the covers of a formal biography, which in the case of actors is too often a bleak affair of dates and records of productions. But the unusual character of the present volume, a collection of impressions by different people, is both something of a triumph in biography and a fitting tribute to the subtle blending of mentality, emotions and spirituality that was Herbert Tree.

The Contributors

He would have approved its unconventionality, for in every page this vivid, many-sided nature is re-created, not by one biographer, weighed down by facts, but by many who loved him and knew him best.

The contributors to the volume are his widow, Lady Tree; his daughters, Viola and Iris; his brother, Max Beerbohm; Bernard Shaw, C. Haddon Chambers, Edmund Gosse, Sir Gilbert Parker, Desmond McCarthy, W. L. Courtney and Louis N. Parker. Two sonnets by Iris Tree, the sermon preached by the Bishop of Birmingham at the memorial service, July 12, 1917; speeches made by Mr. Asquith, Lord Reading and Sir Squire Bancroft at the unveiling of a memorial tablet on the Charles Street wall of His Majesty's Theater, May 27, 1918; Tree's Impressions of America and extracts from his notebooks are included. There are many illustrations.

Herbert Draper Beerbohm, better known as Herbert Tree, was born in London, December 17, 1853, the son of Julius Ewald Beerbohm and Constantia Draper. He was educated at Frant, in Kent, and later at Schnepfenthal College, Thuringia. His father was a grain merchant and the proprietor of Beerbohm's Corn Trade Journal, which reported the daily movements of ships and cargoes in the corn trade. Both he and his father were members of the Baltic Exchange.

Began as a Clerk

At seventeen he "went into the City" as a clerk in his father's office and helped in the preparation of the Journal. Soon he became known as an amateur actor and in 1878 went upon the stage professionally, playing many parts in London and the provinces. His first success was made as the Rev. Robert Spalding in "The Private Secretary." This role he originated in London, and invented most of the familiar catchwords and phrases of the part, which subsequently became so popular.

In 1882 he married Miss Maud Holt. Their first child, Viola, was born in 1884; their second, Felicity, in 1895; their third, Iris, in 1897.

In 1887 he became his own manager, producing "The Red Lamp" at the Comedy Theater with much success. In 1895 he built Her Majesty's Theater, of which he remained manager until his death. It was there in 1905 that he gave his first Shakespearean festival. It lasted for one week, but he produced a different play every evening, taking the leading part in each.

Raised to Knighthood

In 1909 he was knighted. After this honor had been conferred upon him he did not disdain to appear in vaudeville, and in 1912 played Austin Limmason in Kipling's "Man Who Was" at the Palace Theater, London. A linguist, he once acted in French, at the Prince of Wales Theater, as Mont-Prade in "L'Aventuriere." He founded the Academy of Dramatic Art in London, and was the author of three books, An Essay on the Imaginative Faculty, Thoughts and Afterthoughts and Nothing Matters.

In 1895 he first visited America, appearing in "The Ballad Monger," "The Red Lamp," "Hamlet" and other plays. During his second visit in 1915-'16, when he presented "Henry VIII" and "Colonel Newcome," he filled a contract with a film company in Los Angeles, playing Macbeth.

The first half of the memorial volume is occupied by Lady Tree's souvenirs of her husband, "Herbert and I." It is full of intimate sketches of their home life as well as details of their professional adventures at His Majesty's, where Tree presented a long line of vivid theatrical portraits which included such widely diversified characters as Svengali, Sir Peter Teazle, Austin Limmason, Fagin, Falstaff, Mephistopheles, Bottom, Caliban, Petruchio, Cardinal Wolsey. The character of Lord Illingworth in Oscar Wilde's "Woman of No Importance" was written for him.

By her own admission Lady Tree was at first a Greek scholar and something of a blue-stocking, but marriage with an actor brought her into the theatrical world, and she played many parts in her husband's productions. During those days celebrated statesmen, writers, artists, women, beautiful and famous, gathered about the genial manager and were guests at his sumptuous supper parties given in the Dome, as he called his quarters at His Majesty's. To-day almost every one who has attained distinction in the theater can look back upon salad days spent in Tree's company.

HERBERT BEERBOHM TREE as Richard II, a character he declared shortly before his death to be his favorite

Lady Tree speaks of the first pang of jealousy caused by her husband.

"He arrived radiant with a parcel. 'It is Myra Holme's birthday' (Myra Holme was the heroine in 'The Colonel' and married Arthur Pinero), 'and I have got her a scarf from Liberty's. Isn't it lovely?' 'Too lovely,' I answered, with ill concealed acerbity, and he added insult to injury by using my writing paper, which had a large M upon it, to wreathe 'Dear Myra' round my initial. Darling Herbert, you hadn't the slightest idea how cross I was for that one afternoon or you would have been unhappy. There never was so gentle and tender a heart; thoughtless sometimes, but the moment you realized another's pain or difficulty 'consideration like an angel came.'"

Tree was fond of riding.

"One winter—1896, perhaps—I had gone without Herbert on a little visit to Lady Wantage at Lockings. There in the Berkshire Downs I saw a lovely horse that was for sale. In my mind's eye I put Herbert upon its back, and the picture pleased me. I returned to London the secret possessor for the sum of £60 of what the groom described as 'a very nice little bit of horseflesh.' On one another's birthdays we were wont to spring little surprises—a bicycle pretending to be a bonnet, a watch inside a breakfast roll and so forth. On this particular birthday of Herbert's I first brought him up 'Bingo,' our accustomed poodle, with a new bow tied among his ringlets and a declaration that he was this year's lovely present. Herbert laughed at the joke, but grew wistful at the disappointment, whereupon I told him I had a piece of furniture in the hall, but could not bring it up. This roused him to scant enthusiasm, for he knew my modern antiques too well. When he came down, however, crying, 'Where's this boasted present?' the front door was opened, and there on the doorstep stood Viola, holding the horse's head—the horse on the pavement, its front hoofs on the mat! Nothing I ever gave him—though how he loved and cherished his watch and chain woven of all our initials!—nothing gave him so much pleasure as the horse, which he rode for so many years that some unkind wag declared that he turned from a roan into a chestnut."

A picture of Tree as a father is given by Viola and Iris Tree in the chapters "My Father" and "Memories." Says Viola:

"Some one, a man, who had no particular reason to love him as we do, said to me: 'Your father was quite the most irresistible man I ever met.' That is exactly how I think of him—irresistible, absolutely dominating. From the time when I was little until now, when I am more than grown up, the attitude of blind obedience and of abandoning all other occupation of the moment to do his will was absolute, even if in my heart I thought him wrong; to me he was a never failing excitement, a surprise, an event."

Says Iris:

"When we were children he used to take us away from our lessons to play with him, telling the governess that he had hated lessons, that he never read books and that most education was useless. He told us fairy tales, and never scolded us unless we had been rude or unkind."

His brother Max speaks of Tree's acuteness in judging human character. To him Tree seemed always, even in death, "radiant." "Big is a word that attaches itself in my mind to so much concerning Herbert. His body was big and his nature big and he did so love big things! Mountains, cathedrals, frescoes, Shakespeare, summer skies, Wagnerian opera—his spacious temperament welcomed everything of that sort."

Tree found great happiness in the companionship of his daughter Iris, who came with her father on his last visit to America. He was proud of her gifts as a poet, and one of the most beautiful tributes to his memory is the sonnet printed at the beginning of the present volume:

MY FATHER

I cannot think that you have gone away;
You loved the earth—and life lit up your eyes,
And flickered in your smile that would surmise
Death as a song, a poem, or a play.
You were reborn afresh with every day,
And baffled fortune in some new disguise.
Ah! can it perish when the body dies,
Such youth, such love, such passion to be gay?
We shall not see you come to us and leave
A conqueror—nor catch on fairy wing
Some slender fancy—nor new wonders weave
Upon the loom of your imagining.
The world is wearier, grown dark to grieve
Her child that was a pilgrim and a king.

A Drinkwater Life of Lincoln

English Author Imagines a Meeting Between the Emancipator and Shakespeare

ABRAHAM LINCOLN, THE WORLD EMANCIPATOR. By John Drinkwater. Published by the Houghton Mifflin Company.

JOHN DRINKWATER, the only Englishman who ever wrote a play about Abraham Lincoln, apparently did not exhaust his knowledge of American affairs in the one effort. At least he appears to have conserved enough to make up another small volume, Abraham Lincoln, the World Emancipator.

Actually, there is not so much about Lincoln as one might expect from the title and the emancipating idea is carried out only in the 1920 Wilsonian sense. But once having become identified with the American public as a Lincoln spokesman, it doubtless seemed unwise to stray too far in any new direction. With the eyes of the country still focused his way, Mr. Drinkwater capitalizes the moment to talk of contemporary events against the background of his assured Lincoln success.

Since the completion of his play, Mr. Drinkwater has visited America and learned at first hand much that before he knew only from the copybooks. Writing as an Englishman among Americans, his thoughts naturally turn to the possibilities of an Anglo-American alliance.

It must be that the Englishman never fully believes there is a regulation country across the sea until he has seen with his own eyes. Until actually visited, the United States is apparently "just one of those provinces." For when he does get here, after the first chorus of ohs and ahs at our bigness and noise, the English visitor promptly begins talking of a union between the two countries as though it were some brand new idea that never would occur to the people at home.

Few of them seem to realize that an Anglo-American alliance is old stuff. We tried it once. And concluded it—if we have the dates correctly—back in 1776.

"Moving among Americans," writes Mr. Drinkwater, "I am daily more and more aware that underneath all external differences there is a profound unity of being in our two races, that the problems confronting us are largely the same, and that any supreme figure that can be found to stand for an inspiration to either of us may very rightly so stand for both."

And here we have the Lincoln cue. Mr. Drinkwater proposes that Lincoln stand not only as a reconciler of the differences between the two countries but as a symbol for a union.

"If an Anglo-American alliance can be achieved for the good of the world, there is no figure so well fitted as he around whom may crystallize the governing idea of such a union. Through a common homage," he explains, "we shall point our imaginations to a common aim, and we in England may well look to America with gratitude for a light so clear and with our gratitude will be mingled the pride of kinship."

Mr. Drinkwater feels that his radicalism will meet with a warm response at home. He writes:

"None but a tomfool Englishman thinks that the English are better than the Americans, and none but a tomfool American thinks that Americans are better than the English."

Later he explains that "there is but one country in the world outside America that could by any chance have produced a man of the exact intellectual cast and moral significance of Lincoln, and it is England. Nor would an Englishman wish to think that in any other race than the American could be produced a man corresponding to an ideal of his own."

As an epilogue to his vision of an Anglo-American alliance, Mr. Drinkwater presents a dramatic sketch of a meeting between William Shakespeare and Abraham Lincoln. The scene is laid "in the shades," a rather ambiguous allusion—as we take it—to the Great Beyond.

Shakespeare is seated on a fallen tree by the side of a stream. A fellow shade, of the true spectral height, approaches him through the wood. A look of pleased recognition comes into Shakespeare's face, and he speaks.

Shakespeare—Hullo! If it isn't Abraham. This is uncommonly well met.

Lincoln—Good evening, Will. I don't want to disturb you, though.

Shakespeare—I could want no better company. Let us talk. Sit down. . . . It's thirty years or more since I saw you.

Lincoln—It's all that guy Plato. He will argue. I met him just after I left you that time, and we got on to the slave question. I generally let him talk, but I simply couldn't stand that. And then there was no end to it. We've been at it ever since. Every year with the coming of the spring he grows more eloquent and more stupid. This is his thirteenth season, and I've left him at it. I could bear it no longer. Crazy old Athenian junk. He's as obstinate as a Sangamon pig, too. I've made it perfectly clear to him over and over again. And he will stick to it that the highest interests of a chosen few warrant the subjection——

Shakespeare—Steady, Abraham. Don't start another thirty years with me. . .

Soon the conversation swings around to reputations.

Lincoln—I suppose you are the greatest Englishman.

Shakespeare—To my surprise it is said so.

Lincoln—A poet! That is remarkable.

Shakespeare—It is being suggested that you are the greatest American

Lincoln—So I hear.

Shakespeare—A politician! Even more remarkable.

Lincoln—And yet, it's—what your descendants would call rather fun, isn't it? . . . Did you really do so well out of those plays?

Shakespeare—I built as good a house as any in Stratford out of them, and I took——

Lincoln—Oh, yes; the trademark of gentility. I never thought of that myself. . . . By the way, I once wrote a poem. You never heard it by any chance? It wasn't very good.

Shakespeare—No, I never heard it.

Lincoln—Shall I repeat it for you?

Shakespeare—I expect, as you say, it wasn't very good. And I have rather severe standards. So many of my friends had a talent for that sort of thing.

Lincoln—Eh? Yes, well, I dare say you are right. . . . I see that one of your fellows has made a play about me.

Shakespeare—Indeed? He had an eye for a theme, at least.

Lincoln—Don't tell any one, but I got a copy sent across here. It's well enough—in fact, I should like to see it. But he plays the devil with one or two of my best speeches.

Shakespeare—Don't worry, Abraham. They do that with all of mine. . . .